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The twentieth century: a theological overview

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The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview

Gregory Baum, Editor

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and Novalis, 1999

263 pages, \$29.95 Softcover

Gregory Baum, Canada's premier theologian, reminds me of the "energizer bunny" – he just keeps on going. This collection of essays, which he edits and in which he makes contributions, represents one of his latest efforts in a career which has spanned decades. Now, I have the somewhat impossible task of reviewing this work within the constraints of time and space. Of course, any such joint work of many scholars represents some sections which are better than others. Also a reviewer is tempted to undertake a critique of those areas with which (in this case) he disagrees or about which he aspires to write. Although I am tempted to undertake my assessment of *The Twentieth Century* in these two ways, I would rather limit my comments to three observations.

First of all, I am struck by the uniformly high quality of all the chapters. This book stands out as a solid compendium of the theological work of this century, while at the same time the editor recognizes those elements and contributions that were left out. Certainly some of the chapters had special appeal to me because of the nature of my own research over the years. Doug Hall's finely crafted work on the impact of the Great War upon the postwar emergence of the neo-orthodox greats brings to life the horror that turned Protestant liberals back to the groundwork of the Protestant Reformation, and James Reimer's piece illustrates how such neo-orthodoxy mounted a profound challenge against Nazi idolatry. I appreciated Joseph Komonchak's portrayal of 1930s Catholic theology, especially his description of the work of M.- D. Chenu. Quite valuable also were the chapters on ecumenism, Vatican II and the various liberation theologies that give hope to a groaning and tortured world. Although I highlight these topics I remain impressed, above all, by the uniformly high quality of all the entries.

Most of all, I am moved by the obvious presence of Greg Baum throughout the book. His footprints are everywhere, most obviously in his skill of bringing together progressive theologians of all stripes and variety. Over the years Dr. Baum has built networks of theologians dedicated to justice and inclusivity. Whether different faiths, secular utopias like Marxism or oppressed sectors of our globe (aboriginal people, different races, women, the poor, etc.), Greg Baum continues to call us together. He is our mentor. Especially, I liked his concluding remarks – the acknowledgement of context, the humility of witness to all our limitations and the style of a learned gentleman. In this book and his other works we are the richer for his presence.

In my opinion, a worthy work of intellectual history (a category, I believe,

describes *The Twentieth Century*) contains a clear interplay of thought with historical context. Yet there remains a constant tension between these two poles, and none of us escapes coming down more heavily on one or the other, however nuanced we might seek to be. My own interests carry me closer to the social context out of which people speak. For example, when I look at the work of Père Chenu I am drawn immediately to those realities that shaped him so decisively – the growth of the French proletariat outside of the church, the Communist leadership presence in the French working class from the 1930s, the Popular Front, the rise of working-class specialized Catholic Action (J.O.C.) and the collaborationist epoch and post-World War II Pentecost which produced the missionary parishes, the *Mission de France* seminary and the worker-priests. As theologians we are inclined toward a disembodiment of our ideas as if they had an independence apart from our history and locus within class, gender, culture, et. al. If *The Twentieth Century* falls into this trap it does so infinitely less than other works of its type. As ever, Greg Baum underscores the role of context. I am reminded of an article in an earlier work edited by Dr. Baum (*Concilium: Work and Religion*, 1980). In an essay called “Labour and Religion according to Karl Marx,” Latin liberationist Otto Maduro presents to all us who sell our theological labour that we operate in a society of class domination and thus produce our theological products in an alienating context. This sobering thought stands as a challenge to any and all of us who do theology in a privileged context, most often economically and spatially distant from those we might objectify as the poor and oppressed. In such a self-critical context of profound uneasiness, fine books like *The Twentieth Century* offer their richest gifts.

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Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of “Neo-Orthodoxy”

Douglas John Hall

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998

166 pages, \$27.95 Softcover

Christians are not exempt from the effects of the cultural amnesia so characteristic of our society. What we tend to remember from our theological past are the so-called (and in most cases rightly called) “great works,” more often than not in summary, condensed, or excerpted form. In this “dual retrospective” at once of his own theological biography and that of the movement known as “Neo-Orthodoxy,” Douglas John Hall provides an antidote to theological amnesia. He does so not simply by providing his own overview and interpretation